

P L A Y B A C K

Every Home Should Have One

An undervalued or forgotten gem you may have overlooked.



Dog days: Snuffy Walden (centre) flanked by Al Roberts (left) and Les Sampson.

Stray Dog 'Stray Dog'

(Manticore)

BACK IN 1973, WHEN JIMMY SAVILE WAS ON TV all the time cautioning careless car drivers to 'clunk-click – every trip', I was getting my road-safety advice from a rather different source.

Now then, now then, who could that source be? Step forward guitarist/vocalist William Garrett 'Snuffy' Walden, whose Highway Code counsel crops up a minute or so into 'Tramp (How It Is)', track one on Stray Dog's self-titled debut album. First, a brooding dose of operatic droning lulls you into a false sense of security. And then...

'Fasten your seat belt!'

Snuffy's shrieked warning comes too late. He unleashes his liquid, lascivious guitar – sounding like a Frankenstein-monster version of ZZ Top's Billy Gibbons – and the sudden impact jerks you forward, and your head smashes through the glass coffee table on the floor in front of you. As you pluck crystal shards from your forehead and examine your neck for whiplash injuries, Snuffy and his band-mates (Al Roberts, bass/keyboards; Les Sampson, drums) show no mercy: their mongrel sound just gets more beat-up and mangy by the second. Is 'Tramp...' the greatest opening track on any album, ever? I'd put big money on it.

Stray Dog began life as Aphrodite, a trio based in Texas. The line-up was Walden (born in Louisiana, raised in the cowboy state), Roberts and drummer Randy Reeder. One night while they

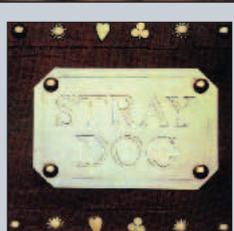
were playing in a club in Roberts's home town of Denver, Colorado, Greg Lake turned up in the audience (ELP were playing locally). Lake was so impressed by Aphrodite that he offered them a deal with ELP's Manticore label on the spot. It was time to believe in Father Christmas.

Lake wanted Aphrodite to hop on a plane immediately and fly back to the UK to make an album. Snuffy and Roberts agreed, but Reeder didn't want to quit the US so the pair left him behind.

Once in the UK they found a new drummer (Sampson), changed their name to Stray Dog and recorded their debut with Lake producing. The three-piece then wandered off on a tour with ELP... but inexplicably their album went nowhere, and follow-up release (recorded with a slightly different, expanded line-up) 'While You're Down There' suffered the same fate.

Why did Stray Dog fail? I dunno. It's one of the rock world's biggest conundrums.

With the exception of the eccentric spoken ballad 'A Letter', every track here is as savage as a pedigree pit-bull chewing on a fat pigeon. 'Crazy' continues the leery mood established by 'Tramp...', and 'Chevrolet' is actually more reminiscent of an 'Eliminator'-style hot-rod (no wonder, it has the mysterious B. Gibbon [sic] co-credited as a writer; the song was also on ZZ Top's 'Rio Grande Mud' album). Elsewhere, 'Speak Of The Devil' has massive female backing vocals (from



TRACKS

- 'Tramp (How It Is)'
- 'Crazy'
- 'A Letter'
- 'Chevrolet'
- 'Speak Of The Devil'
- 'Slave'
- 'Rocky Mountain Suite (Bad Road)'

PERSONNEL

- Snuffy Walden (guitars, vocals)
- Al Roberts (bass, keyboards, vocals)
- Les Sampson (drums, percussion, feet)

massive females, no doubt), and 'Slave' is all scraped knuckles and bare bones. The record climaxes with the epic 'Rocky Mountain Suite (Bad Road)', a house-flattening avalanche of dusty ol' 70s heavy-rock boulders.

So what happened after Stray Dog split? With Paul Kossoff's health failing, Snuffy (who was friendly with keyboardist John 'Rabbit' Bundrick) apparently played some guitar on Free's 'Heartbreaker' album and also on tracks for Koss's own Back Street Crawler. Snuffy

then made albums of his own and moved to LA where his solo schtick continued. He also gigged with Chaka Khan, Eric Burdon and Donna Summer.

Today, Mr Walden is renowned for scoring and playing the chilled-out themes to US TV shows such as *thirtysomething*, *The Wonder Years*, *Ellen*, *Roseanne* and the Stephen King mini-series *The Stand*. He even won an Emmy for his slyly evocative work on *The West Wing*. But would President Bartlet approve of the guitarist's wild rockin' past?

(Stray Dog's debut is available today as a remastered CD on Zoom Club Records.)

Geoff Barton



IN A NUTSHELL

Texan nomads who sound like a mutant ZZ Top, brought to you by the guy who wrote the theme to TV's *The West Wing*.